

## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

All offices of the National Archives hold material about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, but the most extensive holdings are in Canberra, Melbourne and Darwin. These offices hold information about the administration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs during the twentieth century. Other records referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are also held.

### **The Bringing Them Home (BTH) name index**

Many of the names of Indigenous people referred to in these records have been indexed in the BTH name index. For more information refer to *Fact sheet 175 - Bringing Them Home name index*.

### **Administration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs**

At Federation, section 51(xxvi) of the Constitution precluded the Commonwealth government from making special laws for people of the Aboriginal race in any State. As a result, the administration of Aboriginal affairs through the twentieth century was primarily a State responsibility and surviving records are held by the various State Archives (but see overleaf for Victoria).

The Commonwealth's involvement in Aboriginal affairs before 1967 arose largely from its administration of the Territories, particularly the Northern Territory.

On 1 January 1911, administration of the Northern Territory, with its large Aboriginal population, transferred from the government of South Australia to the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth retained responsibility for the Territory until 1978 when self-government was attained. Records held in the Canberra and Darwin offices document policy issues as well as the day to day lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people during the period of Commonwealth administration.

Although the Australian Capital Territory had distinct Aboriginal communities living within its borders, the Commonwealth government reached agreement with the New South Wales government that these people would be administered under State Aboriginal legislation by the New South Wales Board for the Protection of Aborigines. Relevant records are therefore held by State Records NSW.

In 1967, a referendum authorised amendments to the Constitution which gave the Commonwealth government power to legislate for Aboriginal people living in the States. The Commonwealth assumed responsibility for certain aspects of Aboriginal affairs establishing, in 1972, the Department of Aboriginal Affairs which was replaced by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission in 1990.

## **Records relating to the Northern Territory**

Material about Northern Territory Indigenous people is held by the Archives in Canberra and Darwin. Records held in Darwin, which date largely from the 1920s, include population records, the Register of Wards, patrol officers' reports and records relating to pastoral property, health and education.

## **Records relating to Victoria**

For the period 1836 to 1859 records about the administration of Aboriginal affairs are held by the Public Records Office of Victoria (PROV), while those from 1860 to 1972 are largely, but not entirely, with the National Archives in Melbourne. The split is the result of 1975 Victorian legislation transferring responsibility for Aboriginal affairs to the Commonwealth. Records that had already been deposited with the PROV remained there; those not already deposited were transferred by the State Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs to the Commonwealth. [walata tyamateetj: A guide to government records about Aboriginal people in Victoria](#), (Public Record Office Victoria and National Archives of Australia, Melbourne, 2014, 87pp) describes the records held by each institution.

## **Other states**

Records about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in other offices of the Archives are not as extensive as those described above and tend to belong to general record series about matters such as employment, welfare and education rather than discrete series about Indigenous people. These records can be found by using a variety of finding aids, including [RecordSearch](#).

## **Other records about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people**

### **Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody**

The records of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody are held by the National Archives and some are available for public access. The records have been listed in the Archives' guide, [Aboriginal Deaths in Custody: The Royal Commission and its Records, 1987–1991](#), compiled by Peter Nagle and Richard Summerrell (1996, 92pp).

## **Defence service**

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have served in Australia's defence forces in times of war or in peace. *Fact sheet 63 - War service information* has more details.

## **Other sources for family history research**

The National Archives' guide, *Finding Families: The Guide to the National Archives of Australia for Genealogists*, compiled by Margaret Chambers (National Archives of Australia & Hale and Iremonger, 1998, 330pp), has information on many kinds of records that contain information about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people including electoral rolls, records of Commonwealth government employment and investigation service case files.

## **Memorandums of Understanding**

The National Archives has signed memorandums of understanding with organisations representing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in Victoria, South Australia and the Northern Territory that outline arrangements for access to records held by the Archives for the purpose of re-establishing family links.

- *Fact sheet 114 - Memorandum of Understanding with Northern Territory Aboriginal people*
- *Fact sheet 205 - Memorandum of Understanding with the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency*
- *Fact sheet 209 - Memorandum of Understanding with South Australian Indigenous people*